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Artful Dodging

The Stennis Subcommittee, which investigated the Cuban military buildup last fall, did a thorough and valuable job. It showed where and how Administration spokesmen sought to obscure the facts, pausing to note that "in order to deceive, it is not necessary to tell a falsehood." Its most important contribution is its finding that our intelligence community was strongly influenced in its analysis of intelligence material by the "philosophical judgment that it would be contrary to Soviet policy to introduce strategic missiles into Cuba." The Subcommittee told of its own "great concern" about reports that strategic missiles and bombers "have not been removed from Cuba but are concealed in caves and otherwise." And it noted that the Administration's assurances that the Soviets have pulled out their missiles and cut down the number of troops they have stationed in Cuba are based on the same kind of evidence that led the Administration to assert, prior to October 14 of last year, that no "offensive weapons" had been brought into Cuba. What these assertions are based on, said the Subcommittee, is "the negative evidence that there is no affirmative proof to the contrary."

On the basis of the findings of the Stennis Subcommittee, a Republican group in the House headed by Rep. James Battin (Mont.) is now agitating for a change in our intelligence procedures. "A system under which facts are not given sufficient weight when they fail to jibe with a preconceived theory of how the Soviet Union is going to behave, under which the limitations of aerial photography seem not to be recognized, and under which the customary military practice in evaluating intelligence is reversed imposes a dangerous myopia on intelligence agencies," says the Battin group.

"The intelligence people," according to the Stennis report, "apparently invariably adopted the most optimistic estimate possible with respect to the information available. . . . [a method of interpretation] in sharp contrast to the customary military practice of emphasizing the worst situation which might be established by the accumulation of evidence."

The Battin group believes the Stennis Subcommittee should have gone one step further and asked: "Who was responsible for applying rules of interpretation on Cuban information far stricter than those normally applied by intelligence agencies? Who

were the Kremlinologists who concluded that the Soviet Union would never place missiles in Cuba?

Whose preconceptions were taken into account in weighing the facts?"

When the government starts to deceive the public about the real dangers in Cuba that's bad; when it starts to deceive itself, it could be catastrophic.